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## **The Work of Effective Middle Grades Principals: Responsiveness and Relationship**

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### **Abstract**

Findings from research studies suggest that school leadership accounts for fully one quarter of total school effects on pupils, making it second only to classroom instruction among school-based factors affecting student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). While a considerable body of research has analyzed effective school leadership in general, remarkably few studies have examined the leadership of middle grades schools in particular (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, & Gross, 2006), despite the fact that students' performance in the middle grades has been linked to later life success (Balfanz, 2007). The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze middle grades principals' perceptions of effective school leadership. We focus within this article on leadership dispositions in particular, in the interest of space and because the domain remains particularly unexamined within the middle grades literature. We begin with a brief overview of related research and the theoretical framework that grounds our study. We then describe the qualitative methodology employed to pursue our purpose. Next we examine two key areas of our findings on middle grades leadership dispositions: developmental responsiveness and relationship. Finally, we consider the implications of this work for policy, practice and future research.

### **The Challenge of Leading in the Middle Grades**

The effect of school leadership on student learning is well documented. Studies suggest that leadership accounts for fully one quarter of total school effects on pupils, making it second only to classroom instruction among school-based factors affecting student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). While this phenomenon occurs across the K–12 spectrum, some assert that middle school principals face particular challenges to their effectiveness, due to three key concerns:

1. the unique nature and needs of 10 to 14 year olds (Anfara et al., 2006)
2. the variety of building configurations in which they are served (Powell, 2011)
3. an increasing awareness of the critical role the middle grades play in later life success (Balfanz, Hertzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

### ***Developmental Needs***

The developmental nature of young adolescents suggests they straddle a fine line between a need for independence and the desire for the reassurance of understanding adult role models (Brighton, 2007; Powell, 2011; Stevenson, 2002). Educators of this age

group are not surprised to find students confident, energetic, and mature one minute while emotionally fragile, physically sluggish, and child-like the next (Brighton, 2007). Because middle grades students often suffer from anxiety, depression, and feelings of low self-worth and are at particular risk for “declines in academic motivation, perceived competence, intrinsic interest in school, and self-esteem,” they are in need of considerable support systems (Anfara et al., 2006, p. 23). As a result, middle school principals lead schools characterized by a unique set of programs, practices, and curricula.

### ***Building Configurations***

Leading in the middle grades also presents unique challenges due to the wide array of building configurations in which young adolescents are served (Powell, 2011; Vermont Middle Grades Task Force (VMGTF), 2009). Rural states, in particular, rely on a variety of grade levels and building structures to educate middle level learners. In some small states, young adolescents attend over ten different school types, including K–6, K–8, K–12, 5–8, 6–8, 7–8, and 7–12 (VMGTF). Sharing facilities and human resources with other student populations and even other building leaders can require a careful negotiation of terrain. Although benefits exist in such school organizations, potentially negative effects threaten necessary middle school programming, such as the challenges inherent in maintaining block scheduling and interdisciplinary teaming while relying on overlapping staff and physical spaces within the building.

### ***Later Life Success***

The middle years have been termed the “forgotten middle” (ACT, 2008, p.2), “education’s weak link” (Southern Regional Education Board, 1998) and considerably more favorably, albeit over two decades ago, “the last great hope of American youth” (Carnegie Council, 1989). Research findings increasingly have revealed the critical role that this pivotal time plays in making possible later life success. Our nation’s staggering high school dropout rates reportedly show warning signs as early as 6th grade with “68% percent of our nation’s eighth graders reading below proficiency and one-quarter unable to read at even the most basic level” (Balfanz, 2007, p. 5). Precisely because it is such a vulnerable time, the middle grades are ripe for intervention and call for continued knowledge, skills, and relevant practices on the part of educational leaders to help promote positive youth development during this impressionable period.

### ***Research Purpose***

Given these particular challenges, how do principals effectively lead schools for this age group? While a considerable body of research reveals effective school leadership characteristics in general, remarkably few studies have considered the unique challenge of leading schools for young adolescents (Anfara et al., 2006). The purpose of this study was to address this gap in the research by describing and analyzing middle grades principals’ perceptions of effective school leadership. The main research question follows: What knowledge, skills and dispositions are necessary for effectiveness in the middle grades principalship? We focus within this article on the leadership dispositions in particular, in the interest of space and because the domain remains particularly unexamined within the middle grades literature.

We begin with a brief overview of related research and the theoretical framework that grounds our study. We then describe the qualitative methodology employed to pursue our purpose. Next we examine two key areas of our findings on leadership dispositions: developmental responsiveness and relationship. Finally, we conclude by considering these principals’ perceptions in consideration of future research, leadership preparation, and practice.

### ***Related Research***

For several decades, advocates of the middle school concept have asserted the importance of administrators and educators who understand the culture and learning structures best suited to meet the needs of 10 to 14 year olds (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995, 2010). Although this sentiment can be found in most seminal middle level documents (NMSA, 2010) relatively little research has been conducted on the middle level leader.

The few existing studies offer notable insights in the field of middle school leadership. Anfara and Valentine (2004) determined “approximately twice as many principals had majored in middle level education at the master’s, specialist, or doctoral level than their counterparts in the national sample” (p. 7). Clark and Clark (2008) affirm that principals of highly successful schools were identified as more knowledgeable about middle grades practices, with more than half having taken three or more courses in middle level education. Further, these leaders of successful schools were more likely than their counterparts to implement and value interdisciplinary teaming, exploratory, teacher advisory programs,

curricular programs and intramural activities as important (p. 67).

In contrast, however, most middle grades principals arrive at the position with little or no prior administrative expertise on middle level issues (Anfara & Valentine, 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006). Few principals have taken additional coursework examining the middle grades concepts and only seven states – Alaska, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio and Oklahoma – offer some form of advanced preparation for middle level leaders in university programs in the U.S. (Anfara & Valentine, 2004, p. 1).

To understand the distinctive nature of the middle level principalship and its relationship to highly successful middle schools, Little and Little (2001) invited a panel of ten middle level experts to describe what they considered essential leadership characteristics of middle grades principals. Of the 59 characteristics identified, only five were specifically related to the middle level concept: 1) a commitment to developmentally responsive middle level education; 2) knowledge of middle level curriculum, programs and practices; 3) an understanding of the unique nature and needs of adolescent learners; 4) a commitment to the centrality of the interdisciplinary team organization and the skills in scheduling and supervision to make them effective groups; and 5) a compassionate understanding of the nature and needs of older children and young adolescents (p. 7).

Finally, Swaim and Kinney (2010) recognized the critical role knowledge of middle level education played in school improvement as they surveyed and interviewed middle level principals noted for excelling within their school systems. They asserted, “It takes the skill and commitment of an effective leader to create a whole school of excellence that promotes the academic growth of every student entrusted in its care” (p.8). Swaim and Kinney’s conversations with middle level leaders emphasized knowledge of key foundational documents namely the National Middle School Association’s *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), NASSP’s *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* (2006) and NASSP’s *Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* (1985). Additionally, leaders recognized the practices of creating a shared vision, serving the needs of every student, leading for academic growth and personal development, and lastly, communicating effectively

and sustaining change. As leaders reflected on the categories necessary for effective leadership in the middle grades, according to Swaim and Kinney, each leader agreed that modeling personal and professional development to staff and advocating for middle level education to all stakeholders were essential elements to charting a path of growth in schools.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of the *developmentally responsive middle level principal*, as framed by Anfara et al. (2006), served as the primary construct informing our data collection and analysis. Anfara et al. asserted that the work of the middle grades principal requires a strong understanding of an adolescent’s social, emotional, physical, moral and academic needs. In particular, they noted that the 10–14 year old learner is “a special kind of learner with unique gifts that are short lived since no one stays a middle grades student for very long” (p. 22). In their view, developmentally responsive practice requires adults to know how to design schools to support the needs of youngsters at this pivotal stage in life. This includes “responding to current challenges, engaging in thoughtful and reflective discussions, and actively and openly embracing the revision and refinement of programs” (Williamson & Johnston, 1999, p. 11).

Developmentally responsive middle level leadership promotes a teaching and learning environment responsive to these critical schooling years (Manning, 1993). A principal’s tripartite focus on the needs of the young adolescent, the faculty, and the school—as well as its surrounding possibly diverse community—creates “effective scaffolds” from which to lead a school effectively (Anfara et al., 2006, p. 22). The overall construct of the developmentally responsive school leader informed the study design and served as a lens through which to examine the resultant data.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze middle grades principals’ perceptions of effective school leadership. Qualitative methodology was best suited for this descriptive purpose, as we were searching for “views and values as well as acts and facts” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 525).

### *Sample Selection and Participants*

Through this study, we sought to identify themes within the participants’ thoughts, words, phrasing and actions that would describe the role of an effective middle grades principal as perceived by

those closest to the position: principals themselves. We employed three sampling strategies to identify participants for the study: reputation referencing, snowball sampling and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). We began by consulting the 2009–2010 Vermont Education Directory for the names and contact information of all Vermont principals leading schools serving 10–14 year old learners. Four middle level experts, defined by their significant statewide and/or national middle grades leadership roles, then identified middle level principals on the list whom they deemed to be “effective.” We did not provide criteria regarding the definition of effective leadership; rather, we allowed the criteria to emerge from the views of our colleague experts. This consultation helped get beyond any biases we might bring to the study as former middle grades teachers or in our other professional roles.

After interviewing the recommended principals, we used snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) to expand the sample by asking each of the original participants to identify other effective middle grades leaders. Each initial participant referred between two and four other colleagues. The principals recommended were colleagues whom they respected and valued for their views on middle level education. Often, principals referred a colleague with differing school demographics, level of experience, gender or a grade level. Overall, by using maximum variation sampling, we attempted to “document unique or diverse variations that have emerged in adapting to different conditions” (Patton, 2002, p. 243) and that allow the researcher to “identify important common patterns that cut across variations” (p. 243). Ultimately, we stratified the sample by school demographics, gender, building configuration, and geographic region within our state.

Of the 40 principals identified through the three sampling strategies, 30 responded and 24 participated. 15 were women and nine were men, which was largely representative of the distribution within our state. All held master’s degrees, not surprising given the requirements of the position, and three (12.5%) held doctoral degrees. Their years of experience as principal ranged from one to 19, with an average of approximately seven years. Finally, the participants in this research led schools that were distributed across the six most common school configurations for young adolescents in the state: K–6, K–8, K–12, 5–8, 6–8, and 7–8

### **Data Collection Methods**

We applied several, primarily ethnographic methods in this study, conscious of the importance of

“bringing together multiple perspectives” to the “inherent strengths and weaknesses” in each method to balance both strengths and limitations (Patton, 2002, p. 306).

**Interviews and focus groups.** Of the 24 individual interviews, 20 occurred face to face and four were held by phone. After completing the informed consent form, principals responded to a common series of standardized, open-ended questions (see Appendix A for details) designed to “increase comparability between responses and reduce interviewer effects and biases when several interviews are used” (Patton, 2002, p. 349). All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Each individual interview lasted no more than an hour.

In addition to the individual interviews, principals were invited to participate in a focus group, which “not only discloses what is important to individual respondents, but it attempts to provide a situation where synergy of the group adds to the depth and insight” in the study (Anderson, 1990, p. 241). Of the 24 principals invited, 15 responded and 10 participated in two different focus groups. One focus group was held with a team of five colleagues from the same district; the second group included five principals from different districts across the state. The purpose of the focus groups was to further illuminate middle grades leadership attributes through discussion between principals serving schools of 10–14 year-old learners. Two structured interview questions made up the protocol for the focus groups. These questions were designed from the individual interview data that were previously collected and analyzed.

**Observations.** Observations of five different principals helped us to triangulate findings and added depth to this study. Each of the five principals observed led a differently configured school structure: K–6, K–8, 5–8, 6–8, and 7–8. These five principals also represented a range of demographics, gender, and years of experience. Four of the five observations took place over a full day. In one case, a half-day observation was necessary due to a prior commitment in the principal’s schedule. Each day of shadowing illuminated the principal’s world of work and, although no two days are the same in a principal’s schedule, the observation offered “a check on what is reported in interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 306). Exploring the context of the setting in this way was, as Patton described, “essential to a holistic perspective...gaining first-hand experience with a setting allows an inquirer to be open, discovery

oriented and inductive” (p. 262). In some cases, this extra perspective led to a better understanding by comparing their lived experience to what might have been reported or unmentioned in interviews.

In each case, principals were followed throughout the day regardless of where their tasks took them: to meetings; lunch, recess and bus duties; learning walks; team meetings; interviews for new hires; teaching classes; breaking up student fights; and telephoning parents and superintendents. Each observation resulted in extensive field notes and offered specific opportunities to triangulate participants’ responses from the individual and focus group interviews, document review, and the scholarly literature that informed this study.

**Document review.** Finally, to illuminate the specific beliefs and values held within each of the schools, principals provided materials documenting their school’s mission and/or vision. Principals shared school handbooks, mission statements, parent letters, leadership team meeting notes and teacher team data planning notes, among other documents. When appropriate, some principals shared selected emails. In addition, many referred us to their school website or principal’s page to provide further details.

#### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts, the observation notes, and documents occurred continually, in keeping with Glesne’s (2006) advice, “Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds” (p. 130). The various sources of data presented a more complete, emergent picture than otherwise would have resulted. We cross-referenced interview transcripts, document reviews, school observations, and research memos that were accumulated or composed throughout the collection phase of this study. A system of electronic memo files enabled the identification of preliminary categories and sub-categories. This classification was refined further with subsequent readings of the transcripts, field notes, and documents.

**Individual interviews and focus groups.** The use of a common, open-ended interview protocol enabled a comparison of perspectives on middle grades leadership gleaned from observations across participants. All interview recordings were transcribed in full, and we analyzed the data, looking to identify commonalities and questions across participant responses. Creating codes and sub-codes

through multiple readings of the transcripts, we identified an increasingly fine-tuned coding system. Participants’ statements were analyzed for similarities and differences, as well as opportunities and tensions; these summations continually informed and refined the coding scheme. Each subsequent reading and analysis of the data involved creating and re-creating files directly related to principals’ statements (see Appendix B for elaboration).

**Observations.** The field notes captured during the five observations of principals-in-action provided helpful context for the study. Notes and related research memos were analyzed for congruency with, and disparity from, the initial interview findings. The addition of this thick description also helped to paint the picture of the middle grades principal’s work, in all its complexity. The observations most directly resulted in a set of narrative vignettes (see Appendix C for examples).

**Document review.** Finally, we analyzed school documents and related artifacts shared by principals. We carefully read and re-read the documents and coded each as it related to the principal’s role, cross-checking these codes with the other data sources. These documents added demographic and background information on each of the schools. In addition, this document review supported and extended the interview questions, plus it added insight to the observations of principals.

#### **Trustworthiness**

Although neutrality is “not an easily attainable stance,” it is an important one for creating rapport and trust with participants in a study (Patton, 2002, p. 51). To that end, after each interview was transcribed, individual transcripts were sent to each principal for member checking, to be sure her or his words were accurately represented. According to Glesne (2006), this opportunity can serve three purposes: participants can verify that their perspectives have been accurately recorded; they are able to share and correct information if they are uncomfortable with any of the data being published; and they can offer new insights into the interpretation of the data. Some principals chose to respond with new thoughts; others did not respond at all. We also invited principals to read drafts of findings as they identified, providing a check for potential observer bias before the writing was completed.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Given the qualitative nature and relatively small sample size and geographical concentration of this

study, the findings are not generalizable to a larger population. Further, the majority of data collected in this study stemmed from interviews and thereby greatly increased the risk of reporter and responder bias (Yin, 2003). To account for this, we employed the member checking techniques described above to ensure transcripts reflected participants' statements both accurately and completely. The triangulation of data collection methods and sources was also employed as a strategy to address the limitations of each method, by cross checking interviews with document review and observations in schools.

Additionally, the ethnic and racial diversity of the sample was limited, given that it was representative of the predominantly white state in which the study was conducted. While some racial and ethnic diversity existed within the sample, we did not include participant descriptors so that personally identifiable information could not be traced to any one principal. At the same time, data were not altered in such a way so as to change the position or views of any participant in this study.

## Findings and Discussion

The overall construct of the *developmentally responsive school leader* informed the study design and serves now as a lens through which to discuss the findings. Developmentally responsive middle level leadership promotes a teaching and learning environment focused on the need for strong relationships between and among the young adolescent, the faculty, and the larger school community.

It is noteworthy, therefore, that our study participants linked two developmentally responsive dispositions explicitly to what they perceived as critical to the work of the successful middle grades leader. The first, *responsiveness*, pertains to how principals' strong sense of empathy for young adolescents affected their subsequent developmental responsiveness. The second, *relationship*, highlights the relational approach that the principals employed in their daily work with multiple stakeholders, again related to the particular needs of the students they served. Within this work, we do not mean to suggest that such dispositions are unimportant for elementary or secondary principals; rather, only that our informants found these two attributes to have particular importance in their work specifically in the middle level.

### ***Responsiveness and the Middle Grades Leader***

Although supporters of the middle level concept have long advocated teachers' empathy for, and understanding of, adolescent development as central

to their effectiveness (Powell, 2011; Stevenson, 2002), the role that empathy and understanding play as a function of school leadership has been considerably less clear. Unlike most of the general educational leadership literature, the findings of this study illustrate that these participants drew direct connections between the developmental needs of their students and the leadership approaches they adopted.

A deep empathy for the developmental nature of the adolescent learner united these leaders' perspectives. One principal remembered his adolescent years like they were yesterday. He expressed his memories with a heartfelt expression of empathy for what it was once like to be an adolescent himself. He explained that reliving his experiences helped him stay connected emotionally to the adolescents in his school:

I was a hater of school at this age, and I was probably in the principal's office quite a bit and asked to leave quite a bit right up until high school for that matter. I have always been kind of 13. I can remember being 13 and 14 like it was yesterday. The music, the passion, the confusion. I may not have zits on the outside but I still have zits on the inside all over the place. And that is what fascinates me with the age group.

This principal's ability to remember his own adolescent years aligns to the core of his ability to develop caring connections and meaningful relationships with students in the middle grades.

Leaders in this study were mindful that these youth require a strong fit between their developmental needs and their school opportunities. Otherwise, stated one, "We chance losing them as learners in later years, increasing the potential for them dropping out of school." Of the 24 leaders in our study, each relied on empathy and understanding to create a school culture in students' best interest responsive to the varied physical, emotional and psychosocial needs of students.

***Physical development.*** The physical changes that adolescents experience are often dramatic both in growth and appearance, each often happening at obvious different rates for both sexes. These changes can bewilder adults unfamiliar with the range of diversity characteristic with the onset of puberty (Brighton, 2007). One administrator described the start to a new school year to illustrate the dramatic physical changes some adolescents experience at this age.

A teacher came up to me and said, 'Who is that strange looking man over there with the beard?'

This student literally had a beard, and he looked like he was 21. It turned out that he was an 8th grader who had just moved into the district. I went over to him and I asked why he was here and he said, ‘Well, I’m a student.’

Another leader described the importance of activity and movement for this age group. He expressed it this way:

You see a marked increase in student performance when kids get physical activity. They need to move. You can hear folks in the high school going, ‘Yep, there they go again with that damn recess they have down there.’ If people would stop and look at the research on the age group, physical movement is a non-negotiable important concept.

The practices adopted in schools reflect what a principal believes to be valuable. When young adolescents are regarded as physical and social in nature, allowing time for physical activity and social engagement in the daily school schedule becomes critical. These principals regarded such activity as highly beneficial to a student’s ability to sustain academic focus and a feeling of personal control as an outlet to assist the body’s ability to contend with both physical and emotional stress. True to essential middle school philosophy, this practice deserves attention in middle level research.

**Emotional development.** The principals noted the fine line of emotional vulnerability straddled by students 10–14 years of age. Indeed, students’ experiences often vacillate between a craving for independence and security and a need for playfulness and responsibility (Brighton, 2007). The essence of this teetering characteristic is perhaps best by one participant:

I once had a boy telling me he was the man of the house – he was responsible for everything. He told me how he would drive his mother’s car. He didn’t have a license. He didn’t even have a permit. He was the man. Then one day I heard something clinking around in his backpack. It was filled with Matchbox cars. He’s still a boy. But that’s exactly what they are like at this age.

While many leaders were sympathetic to the adolescent’s need for strong supportive role models, they were also keenly aware of the impact an array of changing moods and behavior can have on adults. They remarked often that teachers need to be well-informed on both adolescent development and curriculum, as well as a wide range of instructional strategies, to

fully understand the necessity for implementing a developmentally responsive philosophy. Otherwise the school leaders are at a loss for truly empathizing with the need to provide youngsters with stimulating and meaningful learning experiences that captivate their changing interests. Finding adults with the right balance of skills can be tricky:

Is middle school more difficult to teach than high school? Yes, it is. It is. These kids are chemical messes; naturally occurring chemical chaos is taking place in their bodies all the time. You’ll have a girl laughing one minute, crying the next. It’s hormones. You have to be able to adjust and morph at a moment’s notice from helpful advocate to stern guardian.

Adolescents are often given conflicting messages from well-intentioned adults who may have their best interests at heart but little knowledge of their uniquely developmental needs. As young people experiment with the foundation of who they are becoming, they too often give conflicting messages and confusing signals to adults. They feel conflicted. One day they act goofy and immature and the next day they act in ways that confuse adults into thinking they have grown up overnight. An adolescent’s need to be liked and respected is huge, yet their actions and behavior can often seem inconsistent with their strong desire for love and acceptance (Stevenson, 2002). As one 7/8 principal put it:

We say, act your age. They are. We say, grow up. Then, we say, don’t act like an adult. We give them so many mixed messages. I think it is really important that we take this age group and really embrace who they are. They are young adolescents and that’s hard because of the inconsistency inherent in this developmental stage.

Adults knowledgeable of these changes understand this paradox about young adolescents and can therefore respond accordingly.

**Psychosocial development.** The research is clear that an adolescent’s positive sense of self is affiliated with a greater increase in feelings of personal well-being, confidence, social competence and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Waterman, 1992). The complex formation of identity is important to understanding where students are developmentally in their thinking and behavior as learners in school. Middle level visionaries of the 1960s and thereafter understood the importance of this concept when arguing that notions of the whole child had to drive

the development of the true middle school, thereby replacing the old junior high model with all its emphasis on the inculcation of academic subjects without regard to the idiosyncracies that define young adolescents. Why is this distinction valuable to know? Because, as one principal stated, “It transfers into everything we provide for them in schools.”

A prevailing belief held by all principals was that their knowledge of the young adolescent learner transferred into the school leader’s roles and responsibilities to provide instructional opportunities in schools that fostered that all-important emergent character development. This knowledge was supported in their quest to implement and expand curricular choices and programs in their schools, as conveyed and valued by this 5–8 principal:

They need exposure to a lot of different things in middle school. Exploratory programs help them find their interests and select courses later in high school, which ultimately will build on their careers in their future.

While a number of participating principals entered into their leadership roles with background knowledge on the developmental needs of the adolescent, for many it was the students who taught them how meaningful it was to keep students engaged through building curiosity, not simply through blind authoritarian regimes that demand compliance at all costs. As a result, participants recognized the importance of providing the young adolescent with differing programmatic choices and opportunities. While most of their knowledge of the young adolescent was gained through prior experience, others noted gaining additional knowledge on middle level education from learned leadership experience.

In sum, principals believed that to effectively lead schools configured to address any combination of 10–14 year learners, leaders need to understand, develop and model in theory and in practice responsiveness to students’ developmental needs. One leader explained, “I do think it is important that leadership connect with this age group because, one, they truly love this age group and, two, they have both the experience and the background knowledge for what is important for these particular learners.” Overall, understanding the nature and needs of this age group affected how leaders approached discipline issues, policy development, and day-to-day interactions. This principal summarized the need for responsiveness simply and succinctly, “If you understand them as learners developmentally,

you can understand that and you design your learning around how they actually learn.”

### ***Relationship and the Middle Grades Leader***

The second area identified in the data was a clear emphasis on relationships; a relational approach was viewed as central to the success in the middle grades. Consistent with middle grades leaders interviewed by Swaim and Kinney (2010), our participants also had strong views on the value of building trusting, caring relationships in schools. A firm foundation of community support begins with increased awareness of adolescent needs communicated clearly between students, faculty, parents, board members, district teams, other grade level principals, community leaders, and outside agencies. While the concept of the relational leader is not new (Cranston, 2011), these middle level leaders connected it explicitly to the nature and needs of the age group; the theme proved pervasive and pertained to all stakeholders. One principal’s comment represented well the leaders’ perspectives overall, “What this all boils down to is relationships. Relationships with kids to adults, kids to content, teachers to content. If you don’t put a significant amount of time into relationships at the middle level, then you are short-changing the system.”

***Relationships with students.*** Connecting and feeling comfortable with young adolescents was viewed as pivotal to success in the middle grades because principals felt it was important to know students as people first. “Know their names, find out what they are interested in, ask them what they like to do, find out who their friends are – talk to them,” stated one principal. Principals also believed it was critical to know who students are as learners to confidently develop challenging programs, curriculum, instruction and activities of interest to their individual and cultural needs. Although all participants felt continuously stretched with the increasing managerial responsibilities and tasks of their jobs, they made a concerted effort to spend time in classrooms, out at recess, in hallways during transitions, in the cafeteria during lunch, and at the door or outside of the building greeting students before and after school. They commented that the relationships they formed with students and the visibility they provided in schools was essential. “How can I support teachers if I don’t know the students?” said one principal. “If I don’t know them as people, I am not going to be much help to teachers about student needs as learners.” Two leaders summed up their vision of their role as principal and their relationships with young adolescents in the following ways:



I think in a lot of people's minds the principal is the one who walks around in a jacket and tie and doesn't get down on a kid's level, is not necessarily going to shoot hoops with them either, doesn't listen to the same kind of music they do or watch the same kind of videos they do. That's what kids are doing and you want to be able to relate to them—having those conversations and interactions with them is important.

I am a relational person by nature. That is something I have in common with the middle school kids. The relationships I form are important to me, and if I can form strong relationships, it makes me more successful in the work that I do.

Principals in this study described the importance of staying current on research in middle level education, to be willing to admit what one does not know, and to continue learning.

You have to be a learner and you have to really like the age group to be successful. You have a lot of energy and you really have to be open to change. Look at what adolescents do on weekends, look at their interests.

In addition, this meant staying current on what is meaningful in a student's life. Echoed by many principals was the belief that students connect more readily and comfortably to adults to whom they can talk about topics connected to their own interests in and outside of school.

Because adolescents experience considerable and ongoing changes in their lives, their developing level of self-awareness can make them hyper-sensitive to the moods, behavior, thinking and actions of the adults around them. Adults more comfortable and in tune with themselves are better suited to dealing with the fluctuating moods and behaviors of the young adolescent (Benard, 2004). This 6–8 principal described best the need for a well-developed level of self-awareness with her statement:

You need to be really comfortable in your own skin so that you can be really comfortable with adolescents. They see you. They know who you are, and they are not easily fooled. That's what I love about them. I think you need the ability to be really comfortable with adolescents. It is amazing how many people are not comfortable with adolescents.

Adolescents watch and mimic adult behaviors and expressions closely. They try on new images and test adult reactions. Adults who feel secure with their own self-image are less threatened with an adolescent's scrutiny. They understand not to take it personally. It is how youth experiment with forming a personal identity.

***Relationships with faculty and staff.*** All 24 leaders appeared attuned to the abilities of their staff and did their best to share an expression of gratitude in genuine ways for their collaborative work efforts. During school visits on more than one occasion a principal offered thanks to people in the hallways, classrooms, or in their offices. Others put a written note of appreciation in staff mailboxes, extended a pat on the back; some gave quick hugs. One principal visited every faculty member in her school one morning and handed out individually wrapped brownies she made at 5:00 a.m. before school. She attached a handwritten note of appreciation thanking all of them for their contributions to their school. Several principals made personal phone calls home when a staff member was sick to let her or him know the principal was thinking of that individual. It was common for these principals to remember birthdays, purchase gifts specific to staff interests, email positive feedback immediately after an observation, or offer verbal comments. Several asked about an upcoming family event in passing or before a goals setting meeting; many visited in classrooms the teachers they knew were having a tough day in order to lend a hand of support. Still others excitedly shared in a project a teacher was doing with students in the classroom or brought resources to teachers during team meetings. In one school, the whole staff ate lunch together daily; in others, principals taught classes, covered lunch duty, bus duty, or recess duty.

A 6–8 principal addressed building and sustaining trust with staff and faculty with an example of what he attributed to his views of personal and professional accountability:

You *have* to build relationships with people and you have to create a picture of what it is you are trying to do. You need to always follow through on the things you say you are going to do. You have one chance at credibility and once people don't believe you are credible your leadership will be compromised. It doesn't mean you can't make mistakes. I make many, but I think people know when I say I am going to do something I do it, and if I screw up, I am going to own that I probably could've made a better decision.

Further, a K–12 principal described her relationship with staff through the lens of her former knowledge and experience as a teacher:

You need to be willing to walk that line between the perception of authority figure and also the one who can develop a relationship with teachers at the end of the day. You have to be willing to build relationships in this job as you did when you were with kids in the classroom. It will help them and teachers will appreciate it.

The practice of open and honest communication with faculty and staff extended to principals speaking out with courage. They seemed to value and honor a shared voice and wanted to hear the insights of other stakeholder perspectives. Some acknowledged the importance of knowing they could not be an expert on everything, and the majority felt confident enough to ask for help when they needed it. Here is the thinking of one 7/8 principal who reflected the comments of others:

You have to be a very strong communicator, be ready to provide and introduce alternatives, you need to acknowledge that you are not an expert in certain areas, but there are experts that you can connect with. I think you identify your strengths and you also identify those areas where you say folks, ‘We need to do this together. We will learn together and somewhere, somehow, end up where we need to be.’

Leaders in this study understood that they were responsible for helping schools stay the course for learners by distributing responsibility and accountability to all adults by ensuring each felt valued as a part of a team. Staying the course was defined as needing flexibility, hard work, professional development, and a network of adults who understood the needs of the students in sync with the culture(s) of the school community:

Many of our new initiatives came by discussions, conversations and hard work as a group of people who are looking at needs, offering suggestions, ideas, testing, trying and willing to fail at certain things. The same goes for professional development as well. As leaders we are trying to devise systems of support within our school that are truly embedded in our design by people who know our school with people who know our kids. When their ideas actually turn into practice, the investment just goes through the roof.

In addition this K–8 principal felt,

Part of the power our education profession has for creativity is collaboration. I have also felt that our profession is one where you could team with somebody and talk with somebody and you could have new ideas and you could come in with new beginnings, new initiatives and see them through. So something that is very powerful for me is the potential for initiative and the potential for creative thinking.

For these leaders, collaboration did not mean that everyone would agree. As much as principals wanted to be inclusive of everyone’s ideas, the notion of reaching a majority consensus was voiced as practically impossible to achieve 100% of the time on any one issue. What drove decisions forward, however, was the agreement that decisions need to remain focused on high quality teaching and learning for young adolescents. According to a majority of respondents, establishing a culture of shared leadership began with everyone feeling respected for their contribution to the discussion. Of even greater importance was maintaining focus on school improvement.

Sometimes that meant what one principal voiced as “a more direct systems approach to re-shape priorities back to representing initiatives for just, diverse and equitable learning environments.” In most instances, principals responded that when consensus could not be reached their recourse was to refer back to what was best for the young adolescent learner. That meant giving teachers a choice. They could make a decision together, or the principal would make the decision based on an agreed-upon school vision.

Transparency was believed to build credibility, and honesty developed trust. In truth, open communication did not always generate good feelings, but in principals’ minds at least their staff and faculty did not need to guess their intentions or question their motives. As one principal encouraged, “Speak the unspeakable. You have to bring out the elephants in the room at some point in this work and if you don’t you are just never going to get to what the particular issue is for a particular culture.”

This group of leaders was inspired by collaboration and strong relationships. They wanted to maintain integrity with staff and move initiatives forward and sometimes that called for painful honesty. This K–8 principal agreed, “I think good leaders listen by really hearing where people are coming from and that helps

me to frame the direction for staff go from where they are and move forward.”

**Relationships with family.** Enlisting the support of parents and guardians often grows harder as children move beyond elementary school. Two of the biggest factors contributing to the discouraging declines at the middle level are the growing complexity in content material as students move into more challenging subject matter and the young adolescent’s desire for more freedom and autonomy from parents at this age increases (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Just when many children begin to assert their independence, distance themselves from parents, and rely more on peer opinion, parents face the concomitant challenge of shifting from communicating with one teacher in a self-contained classroom in elementary school to juggling multiple teachers and subject areas in the middle grades.

Research participants described building relationships with families as not always easy but essential. For some, the most difficult part of parental involvement was convincing adults that 10–14 year old learners respond more positively when adults take the time to know and listen to them first. “I get frustrated when parents and school board members want to see strict classroom procedures like you would find in a high school or in a college,” said one 6–8 principal. “Sometimes I have to convince them sometimes that there is a better way.”

The principals reported a range of effectiveness in recruiting parent participation in schools. Several described getting parents involved in school as frustrating. Some felt they had tried just about everything to keep parents informed, including telephone calls, letters, websites, parent handbooks, teacher webpages, student-teacher conferences, open houses, and monthly scheduled parent gatherings. Others attended yearly conferences held by the state principals’ association to learn more on how to bring parents into schools and expressed getting a lot of great tips.

One 6–8 principal mentioned that investment in parents was first on her list of this year’s goals. She explained her plan “to incorporate a lot of little things in that will hopefully make parents feel welcome. I think if they are here more they will learn more about the school vs. just coming to a meeting and hearing about it.” A grade 7/8 principal said, “I am always jokingly saying that my next job is going to be principal at an orphanage; it would be easier, but it is

important to get families involved in school because you know they love their children.” In contrast, another grade 7/8 principal expressed his relationship with parents as his greatest asset:

...What parents want most of a middle school principal is for you to know their kid and they want to know the kid’s safe. They want to know if their kid is bullied, that they are going to feel comfortable enough to come to you and if their kid has issues, you are going to reach out to them. Parents want me to know their kid well and they want me to be responsive to the little things the kid needs.

**Collaborative leadership.** As study participants reflected on how to unite different stakeholders in schools, the use of the word collaboration often arose. One stated, “The buzz word of the day is collaboration, but it is a true need. It is really becoming comfortable with collaborative leadership rather than directive leadership and absolutely essential at the level.” The concept of shared leadership emerged as an extension of forging relationships. Another principal succinctly remarked, “Leadership is not a single person, it is a collage in education.”

In this study, democratic and collaborative community school cultures were built on the premise of adults working together on behalf of the whole child. Although the principal was the pivotal person in promoting the vision, all 24 interviewed leaders voiced that student success could not be achieved without the ambitious, intentional efforts of both adults and students focused on high expectations for learning. Some of the more common forms of shared leadership were provided on leadership teams, committees, advisories, in-house professional development, and specially designed student-led programs and school-wide events. As one principal asserted, “We could not have all the amazing programs and initiatives we have in place in our school if it were not for the efforts of so many people working together to make them happen. There is no way I could do this alone.” A 6–8 principal urged designing a leadership team that meets weekly:

I would also suggest that every middle school principal have a leadership team because it allows you to stay connected aside from just going to team meetings. I think teaming and collaboration is probably our greatest strength and we hold it sacred, especially in these difficult economic times.

Another principal referred to adult leadership teams as a flattened model of leadership explained in this way:

A flattened model of leadership is a term I use, basically meaning that creating the vision you want to achieve should not be held in an office or a particular classroom or just with particular individuals. It should be shared widely. Kids, absolutely, bring them in. It is a democratic process.

These relational approaches principals employed in their daily work with multiple stakeholders were considered absolutely essential to lead effectively in the middle grades.

### Concluding Thoughts

Middle level principals in this study had much to say about the necessity of leaders being well-versed in developmentally responsive and relational leadership. They perceived this as critical to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of future principals. This led to additional recommendations for further research, policy and practice.

#### *Principal Longevity in the Middle Grades*

In many cases, the most satisfied principals in this study felt they played to their strengths with a combination of leadership styles, skills and dispositions best suited for the needs of the young adolescent. They felt a sense of connection to the students and adults around them. Serving this age group was mentioned as congruent to their philosophy for teaching and learning. As leaders they expressed the ability to form relationships as the utmost importance at this stage in an adolescent's life. We believe the fields of educational leadership in general and middle grades education more specifically would benefit from future study of highly satisfied leaders.

In contrast to principals who leave the profession or move to a different school due to dissatisfaction with their work, most principals in this study were staying in their current schools. Many among them approached the numerous challenges they face daily on a local, state, and federal level with an optimistic attitude of continued hope and perseverance. With a range of experience from one to 18.5 years, six of the 24 principals had led their current schools for more than 10 years and had been recognized with distinction on a state level for their work.

Why then, do some principals stay? Each of the participants in this study reported having plenty of energy and enthusiasm left for their work as leaders.

They demonstrated resilience, energy, flexibility, and engagement in their work. In fact, one 7/8 grade principal stated:

I am now starting my 18th year as a school administrator... There are a lot of good minds that have surrounded me... a lot of good minds. So that is what has kept me going for this many years and I am not quite ready to retire yet and people ask me, 'Are you retiring?' and I say, 'Why do you ask?' and they say, 'Well, because you have been in the field so long.' I'll know when I am ready.

#### *Leadership Preparation in the Middle Grades*

Many strongly advocated that principals take the same coursework required for middle level teacher licensure. As one 5–8 principal explained:

Principals need to take the coursework on middle level philosophy, theory, and best practice and research. They need to get the four courses that middle level educators in Vermont are taking on middle level organization, structure, curriculum and assessment. Those are absolutely necessary because there are going to be many teachers who are very passionate about it, and you are kind of sunk without them because you are not going to be an asset.

A K–8 principal who was working to strengthen awareness in his building voiced his views on his own preparation in this way:

I don't think the one adolescent development course you take for (principal) licensure is enough to do it justice. I was beating my head against the wall thinking it was just me until I spoke with other middle grades leaders and discovered nope, this is a cultural shift we are in. I wish I had known that.

Are the dispositions identified in this research able to be cultivated through advanced preparation and knowledge of the age group? Or are dispositions inherent and some principals simply better suited for the job than others? Principals believed their leadership style was well suited to serve the needs of young adolescents. They empathized with this age group, understood their nature and needs, and felt passionate about schools being developmentally responsive and personalized to the critical middle. Just as teachers need to know the whole learner in their classrooms, principals need to know the developmental and academic needs of the population

of students they serve in their schools. Middle grades principals as educational leaders are uniquely positioned to advocate for schools that are in the best interest of young adolescents. Therefore, we propose that future research into the effects of explicit principal preparation and practice and longevity in the middle grades would be influential in policy making. One 6–8 principal expressed hope with these concluding remarks:

I felt very isolated when I started as a principal because the principal I was working under at the time... wasn't really into middle level philosophy. We need to keep the spirit alive. I know I am asking a lot, but it is so important that we don't lose sight of that philosophy.

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***Appendix A:***  
**Interview Protocol for Individual Interviews**

1. To start, tell me what drew you to this position working with this age group?
2. What would you say new principals serving schools of 10-14 year old learners need to know and be able to do?
3. What do you know now that you wish you had known when you started as a middle grades principal?
4. We know there is no “typical day” for a principal, but share with me what one day might look like for you.
5. What would you do more of if you had more time?
6. If you could have your school look and be whatever you wanted it be what would you change or have stay the same?
7. What are you looking for when you hiring new teachers to work with young adolescents?
8. As a staff and a faculty how do you celebrate your successes?
9. How do you communicate and share your vision of what is important for this age group to all the different stakeholders?
10. Is there any one particular style of leadership or combination of styles best suited for middle level?
11. What are some of your hopes and fears as you continue into the year of 2013?
12. What makes it challenging to lead a middle school?
13. Is there anything we haven’t asked you yet that you think would be important to share about middle level leadership?

**Appendix B:**  
**Coded Interview Responses and Composite Findings:**

**Part 1. What Principals Believe**

<b>Coded Interview Responses: Middle Grades Leadership</b>	<b>Composite Findings</b>
Principals' Ways of Knowing	Greatest lessons learned from teaching and learning beside the young adolescent as educators in elementary, middle and high school grade levels, good fit for teaching and learning philosophy, switched grade levels to reach students sooner. Dismayed by witnessing lack of student engagement in higher grade levels. Viewed 10-14 years as pivotal to student achievement and success in later years. Expressed strong sense of urgency for reaching the 10-14 year learner while they still remained interested in their schooling years. Knowledgeable about cognitive, physical, social-emotional, psychological and moral stages of young adolescent development.
Principals' Ways of Learning	Documents mentioned important to have read and know: Turning Points 2000, This We Believe, Breaking Ranks in the Middle, Middle Grades is Not a Building. Middle Grades Conferences and Organizations: National Middle School Association, New England League of Middle Schools, Vermont Middle Grades Collaborative Summer Institute, Vermont Association for Middle Level Education, Vermont Principals' Association.  Core coursework mentioned: Nature and Needs of Young Adolescents, Middle Level Philosophy and Theory, Middle Grades Organization, Integrated Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment  Other: Visit schools, classrooms, and connect with other principals.
Principals' Ways of Leading	Developmentally Responsive, Relational, Collaborative, Instructional, Resonant, and Community Leadership. Emotional Intelligence: self-awareness, empathy, climate pulse takers, masters of flexibility, transparent communicators, problem-solvers, life-long learners, change agents. High energy, enthusiastic, flexible, creative out of the box thinker with a sense of humor.



**Part 2. Coded Interview Responses and Composite Findings: Translating Beliefs Into Action**

<b>Coded Interview Responses: Middle Grades Leadership</b>	<b>Composite Findings</b>
Why Middle Grades are Structured Differently	<p>Personalized to fit nature and needs of the young adolescent with the following organizational structures: teaming, teacher advisories, responsive classroom, common planning time, flexible grouping and scheduling. Exploratory programs: arts, technology, music, physical education, intramural sports, languages, after school programs.</p> <p>Meets adolescent need for sense of personal efficacy, celebrate teams and school-wide relationships to learning, developmental needs: intellectual, physical, social-emotional, psychological and moral.</p>
“Bringing the Best People on the Bus”	<p>Teachers with a desire and an affinity for the 10–14 year learner, team players, high energy, enthusiasm for learning, creative, fun, good sense of humor, flexible, out of the box thinker.</p> <p>Knowledge of young adolescent development, middle level theory and philosophy, now requiring middle grades licensure grades 5–9 skilled in two content areas, creating interdisciplinary teams, and differentiated instruction and assessment.</p>
Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment	<p>Rigor-challenging, standard-based, inquiry-driven, project based, service learning, integrated technology.</p> <p>Relevance-meaningful, real world, authentic integrated thematically based core content: science, social studies, language arts, and math.</p> <p>Learning styles: multiple intelligence, individualized to fit learners strengths and needs, 16 Habits of Mind.</p> <p>Relationship to learning-meaningful, timely teacher feedback, clear expectations, varied teacher and student assessments: portfolio, rubrics, project based and service learning, student-led conferences.</p> <p>Varied forms of instruction: individual, small group, whole group, active, and engaging.</p>

## Appendix C: Vignettes

### Example 1: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PRINCIPAL MIKE

Schedule for the day:

7:00-8:00	Goals meeting with teacher
8:00-9:00	Goals meeting with teacher
9:00-9:30	Goals meeting with teacher
9:30-10:30	Goals meeting with teacher

Mike begins each meeting on a personal note, asking something he knows about each teacher’s life and interests. He positions his chair directly across from them with his posture relaxed but completely focused on the teacher. He listens intently and asks clarifying questions. They discuss the different needs in the student body this year.

As I listen quietly, I hear teachers who are focused on instruction that is engaging, assessment that is meaningful, collaboration between colleagues, and enthusiasm for learning. Teachers discuss goals for team communication, instructional goals and their efforts in addressing the individual student needs. In each meeting, Mike and the teachers exchange ideas and brainstorm requirements for planning, preparation and direction of teacher goals. There is passion, commitment and amazing energy about topics.

One teacher is bubbling with confidence. The next is excited but appears nervous. One teacher needs guidance with a few challenging students. The next is overwhelmed with a highly emotional family issue, new math curriculum, and needs help managing his time differently this year. Mike helps each teacher explore alternatives to their individual goals and needs. Together they problem-solve solutions and brainstorm ways to address their personal and professional challenges. Teachers sound like they know their students well. In each meeting they discuss resources that may be needed to help support their work in the classroom and discuss other faculty or team members that might help. They link goals with their objectives for reaching them and plan next steps for moving forward.

*10:30-11:00                      Opening in schedule—door to office remains open*

During this time Mike fills me in and as he turns to his computer he shares that he chooses to check email on-going throughout the day. He mentions attending a board meeting until 10:30 last night, so he is feeling a little tired today. That was a 15 hour day, he says. Today his day began bright and early around 6 a.m. After an early morning run, he created his list for the day. After his first goals meeting he checked in with the administrative assistant. Then, he met with the school’s counselor for updates on a student concern. Someone stops by to let him know there is a hamster loose in the building that must have escaped from someone’s classroom. He mentions the “respect tiles” that he carries in his pocket. He can hand these out to students throughout the day if he sees or hears them treating someone else with respect. The tiles are part of a school-wide approach to “catching kids doing things that are positive, kind and respectful,” he says. The phone rings and he checks in with the principal at the elementary school.

*11:00-11:30                      Lunch*

Students split grade level lunches. They have a choice to socialize in the cafeteria after lunch or go outside. Mike wanders around, checks in and says hi to students and staff. He tells me he will eat after recess is over.

*11:30-12:15                      Team meeting check-in*

Mike says he has not been staying in team meetings as long anymore because some teams felt leadership was getting in the way. He runs down to drop in on a team meeting and just asks if there is anything they would like him to be a part of today.

*12:00-12:15                      7/8 Recess*

Mike is off to the soccer field to watch some boys and girls play soccer. He says he likes to play with them, but mostly it is a special time to hang out with the kids. I sit and chat with a new para-educator on a nearby bench who is eating lunch alone. He shares that he is job-shadowing another person today and begins his first day alone tomorrow one on one with a student. He tells me how friendly all the students and staff have been and already he is getting a good feeling about the place.

### **Appendix C: Vignettes** (continued)

12:15-12:25                      *Mike eats his lunch in his office \*

12:25-1:00                      *Planning meeting with Assistant Principal*

Mike and Sarah meet in Sarah's office. She will be away for personal reasons soon and they discuss the many areas that need to be addressed in her absence. Mike shares with me how much he is going to miss her while she is away. "We are a real team," he says and he does not know what he would do without her. They run down a list of agenda items and Mike fills her in on the minutes from last night's board meeting: revenue, retirement, and the budget. Other areas: Sarah updates Mike on yearbook, student needs, para-educator needs and issues, the upcoming open house, team updates and issues, challenging staff personalities.

1:00-1:30                      *Interview for new substitute teacher and tour of the school, visit classrooms, brief 10-15 minute learning walk through classes.*

We take our Learning Walks through classrooms: in some rooms we sit silently and in others he begins by asking a student or teacher what they are working on that day. When meeting with a student at their seat he kneels down beside them. Check-in with both teachers and students feels relaxed, non-threatening, and informal but intentional.

As we walk down the hall, Mike stops and helps a student with a locker that is jammed.

1:30-2:30                      *Final goals meeting with a teacher*

3:00                              *Bus duty*

Mike says goodbye to students. Standing by the buses he greets many students by name and asks each of them a question or makes a personal comment that shows he knows something about them personally. As we head back into the building, it occurs to me that ***no bells rang at all throughout the day.***

2:30-4:00                      *Leadership Team meeting-conference room*

Agenda: a teacher leader from each of the 5/6 and 7/8 teams fills the room along with exploratory teacher leaders. Mike introduces me and the agenda the team created from the last meeting. He gets added input from teachers on anything they might care to discuss further today. One teacher is quite vocal and begins the meeting quickly by voicing her views strongly. Mike navigates the discussion back to the group. They discuss: leadership team process, roles in the group, staff morale, how to encourage more parent and community involvement, and student council advisors getting a stipend for the year. The meeting ends and Mike wraps up some things he needs to get ready for the next day so he can go off and watch one of his own sons play in a soccer game. I thank him for his time and he wishes me luck finishing up.

It's 4:30. Only a 10 hour day today.

### Appendix C: Vignettes (continued)

#### Example 2: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PRINCIPAL STEVE

8:20 a.m.

I sit at a round table with the principal, Steve, and the Special Education Director, in Steve's office. The focus is on a student with severe disabilities and they are brainstorming feeding times and his need for a feeding tube. The para-educator who will be working with him one on one is nervous and the parents are anxious too.

They also discuss additional needs for the high level of students with autism this year. Fourteen total. The talk is about budget cuts and position cuts across the district. Updates are given on staff with severe needs students. One student's mother is pressuring for a residential placement. Steve compliments the special educator on being a diplomat.

Steve apologizes that his schedule today is an "off day." *I am not sure what that means yet except that I have heard it from two other principals now.* He says that it should be calmer than most days. He won't need to spend as much time in his office in meetings. We can spend more time in classrooms. *My experience so far is that every principal's day has looked a little different, which has given me a "big picture" outlook.*

The meeting ends and Steve moves over to respond to a "high priority" email that he says is time sensitive regarding school laptop coverage and he needs to alert the superintendent. *He explains everything to me as we go. All of the principals I have shadowed so far have been former teachers and I appreciate that they explain everything so clearly to me. It puts me right at ease.* He checks an email from a disgruntled teacher. Says he will respond to it later. He has to think about the best approach on this one and he does not want to get sucked into her negativity about having to spend more time with students on their team for an upcoming event. He talks to me about the balance of navigating through all the different personalities, parent and teacher requests.

*I have no idea what time it is now except that schools are like camp. I always feel hungry and ready to eat my lunch in the morning – must be the high energy.*

#### Learning Walks:

We leave his office to tour the school and go on learning walks through classrooms. He tells me it is an opportunity to learn the purpose of the lesson, provide visibility throughout the school, and check-in with kids. He says, "They see me; they know my name and I get to see what teachers are doing." As we walk through the classrooms students say hi to him by name. The tone is friendly and welcoming. Students seem happy, relaxed, calm and interested in the lessons. In one classroom students are working in groups on a social studies lesson, in another a teacher is providing direct instruction on math vocabulary, in others there is a read aloud happening, and students are working with netbooks on independently-designed math programs based on each student's level of ability. Students are laughing and playing a group game in a Spanish class. In Language Arts they are outlining benchmarks with the teacher for an assignment. Expectations are explained very clearly and examples illustrate expectations for success. In the last class we visit some students who are working at tables; some are sitting on the floor, and they are all filling in graphic organizers. This is a very technology rich school; they have SmartBoards, Netbooks...

Steve stops to introduce me to a teacher who switched grade levels last year and joined a new team by choice. Steve says they needed her veteran guidance. She says she was hesitant at first, but now is very happy. Steve tells me he knew her strengths would be an added compliment to the team which is why he asked her to switch. On the table before me they have created team t-shirts. The teacher is bubbling over with excitement to share all their new initiatives. I hear team spirit alive with student voice, student ownership. These t-shirts will also be worn on what they call their annual School-wide Event Day. It is held every year to celebrate team unity and build school community. The school is buzzing as teams prepare ahead.

We return to Steve's office and he goes straight to his computer to type up a brief message to teachers he just visited. He says, "I like to send a few words of encouragement about what I saw in their classes." Before he does he asks me for my observations and we compare similar notes. He then responds to emails from parents. Always, he says, "Respond to emails from parents."

Next up – an interview with a potential new guidance counselor. We are joined by two other staff members. The candidate is young and very nervous. Brings with her an enormous portfolio of work we pass around. He asks two very pointed questions: one – "What do you think about when you think about adolescence?" and two – "How would you describe the difference between a junior high and a middle school?"

### Appendix C: Vignettes (continued)

Before she can answer, Steve gets an emergency call on his walkie talkie and has to leave to go attend to a student. One of the other staff members takes over and completes the interview. After the candidate leaves, the teacher calls Steve to see if he needs help and she leaves to join him. I follow.

When we arrive he says, “Here is an ethical dilemma.” The student he is dealing with has been in trouble before and his parents have given the administration strict orders to call with details before speaking to their son about anything. Steve has been trying to honor their request. Another student is involved. They question her about the incident. Steve returns to call the parent. Steve gives the father details on his son, then returns to talk to the boy involved.

Now only moments back in the office, a staff member peeks her head in the door as buses start to arrive and yells, “Fight!” Steve gets up and walks quickly outside. From his office window I can see the students separate, and he starts interviewing groups of them. No one gets hurt, but when he returns he immediately picks up the phone and calls the parents. He shares with me afterward that it is very important to try and speak to them before their child gets home from school so they are well informed of the details.

He fills me in on the incident and says that he will probably stay for another hour and finish some paperwork. He shares with me how he wants nothing more than for middle schools to thrive. His greatest fear is we will return to a junior high model and his greatest hope is that the middle level philosophy will continue to flourish throughout our state. As I leave and close his office door, I hear him sigh, and through the window I see him – he’s picking up a stack of papers and a pen.

5:00 p.m. *So much for a calm day...*

#### Example 3: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PRINCIPAL JUDY

Principal Judy greets me, checks in with Cindy, the administrative assistant, and graciously hands me a copy of “our” schedule for the day. She reminds me that I am with her only until noon because she needs to leave early to lead a district meeting. Cradled in Judy’s arms is a cardboard box filled with individually wrapped brownies, each with an attached note of thanks to staff, one of which she immediately gives to her assistant with a hug. Judy is getting ready to make the rounds around the school.

“Judy made these brownies before work as a gift of staff appreciation. She does this once a month,” Cindy tells me. “Probably was up at five this morning. Are we lucky or what?”

Judy looks at me and says, “You are welcome to come with me as I pass these out or wait in my office.” I tell her I want to go wherever she goes today.

“You’ll need rollerblades to keep up with this one,” Cindy says. And off we go. I break into a slow jog down the hall with beads of sweat already dotting my forehead. She introduces me to each teacher as we make our way through the school. We stop in the hall outside one classroom and check in with a teacher about a pilot science project. Judy thanks her for her courage, hands her a brownie, gives her a hug and remarks that the project can last half the quarter or the whole school year. As we enter the next classroom a teacher and para-educator are in a serious discussion.

“They had a tough day yesterday with a challenging student,” Judy whispers to me. She immediately listens as they share with her. I sit off to the side and think – *She’s so warm and genuine*. Judy hugs the teacher and says, “We’ll figure it out together,” then puts the brownies down and rushes out the door to the front of the school to greet students coming off the bus. A teacher stops in the hall to tell me, “She tells us all the time how special we are, but good luck following her around; she is everywhere.”

We return to the first/second grade classroom, and the pace quickens. A substitute teacher is coming in today. Judy checks in with her and the para-educator. They get to work together as students begin trickling in. I cannot tell who is the principal, paraeducator or substitute in this room. All are so comfortable and professional. Back to the office. Cindy pops her head in the door and reminds Judy an announcement needs to happen at 8:15. *A real team, these two*. Judy thanks her, runs out with a message she forgot to give to a teacher. I stay in her office as she runs back. A student drops by to ask Judy a question about using an ipod on the bus. They talk it through and the student leaves with a smile. *She is so empathetic*. At 8:00 a.m. the teacher piloting the science project comes in, sits down, and they meet at the round table in Judy’s office. In closing, Judy asks, “Do you have any other questions I can answer?” The staff member replies that it is hard having three fewer people on the teaching staff and Judy replies, “We are finding our way.”

### Appendix C: Vignettes (continued)

Amazingly, it's now only 8:15 and she makes an announcement to the whole school that there will be a lunch change today and a new cook. She tells me their regular cook has sprained his ankle and later she will need to go to the kitchen to do an inventory of food choices for the rest of the week. Judy meets with another staff member about his upcoming paternity leave and tells him, "We are so happy for you but we will miss you like crazy!" Then we are off. Quick stop back to the office to put a message in a staff member's mailbox. As she does this I look at an article on the office wall about her award she has been given for her school. The message characterizes Judy's school as a "culture built on the key elements of shared mission, vision and values as well as collaborative inquiry, focus on learning, sense of community and commitment to continuous improvement." They should have mentioned her non-stop energy.

We visit the kitchen to talk to the new cook. Two sixth grade boys are volunteering to help out. They say they love the small school opportunities here, especially the field trips. At this school one boy who has recently moved from a larger school tells me, "You can fit everyone on one bus." Back to the office to update Cindy on lunch. Run outside to the kindergarten outbuilding. Travel through the library, out the door and across the lawn. Judy goes in, sits down with a group of students and listens. They are playing a lady bug and spider math game. The teacher has the lesson on the overhead. All students are very involved and excited. Judy jots down a few notes she will share with the teacher later.

Back in the main school again Judy peaks her head in the nurse's office and sits in the chair beside her desk. They discuss the nurse's mom. Judy empathizes with her about how hard it is to worry about our parents and gives the woman a hug. She amazes me with her reflective listening skills and how well she appears to know her staff so well. The nurse thanks her and says, "You can't fix everything Judy. I know because we are both fixers." They discuss money for the wellness program and the nurse thanks her for backing her up with a parent she recently dealt with. "You handled it really well like you always do," Judy says. *So this is what collaborative leadership looks and feels like.*

It's just past 9:00 when Judy and Cindy sit down in her office for updates on the budget, an upcoming guest author, bus schedule, staff that are planning to be out on leave, family issues, lunch food. Judy signs forms. On her table is a legal pad with her on-going list of things to do. She carries it with her as she visits classrooms so she can remember all the little details she shares. While meeting with Judy the phone rings. Judy talks briefly with someone from the radio station about announcing school closings. She writes something in her date book immediately.

After Cindy leaves Judy picks up the phone to make a call to the superintendent. While waiting on the line she goes through her inbox and signs forms. Her reason for calling the superintendent is to see if she can re-schedule her expected appearance at a technology training tomorrow. She feels she will be needed at her school tomorrow, given the high level of support needed in the first and second grade right now. While she is on the phone, the nurse puts another form in her inbox, followed by another teacher and the administrative assistant. She jumps up and walks briskly to the office to put notices in teachers' mailboxes about an upcoming schedule change. Her phone rings again and she runs back to answer it. She ends the conversation by saying, "Is there anything else I can do for you today?" She walks to a grade level literacy class, plops down on the floor and listens to a student read. Judy kneels beside others at their eye level while making her way around the room and asks students questions about the purpose of the assignment they are doing and gently probes quietly for their level of understanding.

We walk back to her office for a goal setting meeting with the special educator. Judy helps guide the wording when the teacher has difficulty. Off in the corner I notice a stack of boxes with NECAP tests in them. Her office door is always open so two students drop by and ask if they can speak to her. She tells them she can meet with them soon and they leave and the meeting continues. They discuss special educator's role in co-teaching with the middle grades teachers. The special educator shares that the arrangement is perfect for some students but not feeling appropriate for others. They discuss options on how to support teachers, students and one another. The teacher is feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of time it is taking her to complete IEP's on all students. Judy says she wants to honor her planning time during the day. They work up a plan and Judy suggests she try it and if she is still feeling too stressed they will go back to the drawing board. She helps her rearrange her schedule and says, "The key is to find space where you are not interrupted." She offers her office anytime if the teacher needs it. Meanwhile, Judy's round table is covered with budget forms, crisis forms, and notes from data teacher team meetings.

It's now only 11:00 and I'm wondering if I can last another hour at this pace. But it's time for a meeting with the technology specialist. Judy gives him an article she found for him. They discuss budget items, software updates and licenses, grants, netbooks. We need another server, he tells her. Judy asks why they need a new server and he shares they have been waiting a month for the one he ordered. "How do we move forward?" she wonders out loud, and asks if she can help him out by making a call and how to word the questions she should ask. She says she feels badly that he has put so much of his valuable time and effort into it and has not gotten any answers. She writes herself a note on her legal pad to remember to call. They schedule another follow-up meeting. They talk about a training meeting and Judy agrees they need to arrange one but the end of the month would be better, "People are too stressed right now," she tells him.

### **Appendix C: Vignettes** (continued)

Throughout this, and all her interactions with adults and kids, her tone is so incredibly warm, supportive, and the level of safety is remarkable. She is thoughtful, decisive, creative, flexible, and teacher and student focused. She effortlessly brings the discussion back around to gaining clarity and summarizes their needs. She checks in on each teacher's general stress level and when necessary remarks: "I don't have a solution right now, but I want you to know that I am aware of your needs."

There's a brief lull in the action. She turns to me and says, "You'll notice I don't check email during the day. If I do, it really derails me during the day," she says. "I check it at night." She picks up the phone and calls the cook who is out with a sprained ankle to let him know she is thinking about him and to check in on the menu. Opens mail at the same time and goes through the inbox again. Two students stop by to check with her about an incident that happened with a water bottle and Judy tells them she will get back to them with the outcome. Judy calls the hospital to congratulate a teacher who has just had a baby and talks to the husband too. Then we are off to make rounds in middle grades classrooms.

In every classroom written on the white board is the following: agenda, purpose of the lesson, and summary of the lesson. Judy checks in on all classrooms today and asks each student the purpose of the lesson. *She is giving them her undivided attention.* How can she change gears so quickly? She congratulates everyone on a job well-done, waves back to some kids, flashes a smile all around.

I look around at the quotations I see throughout the day.

- "Leading is Giving—the essence of leadership is offering oneself and one's spirit"
- "Leaders learn much from experience, especially mistakes. Too often though, they miss the lessons"
- "It is the role of the principal to serve as the beacon of possibility in the incredible fog that can cloud what it is that schools are trying to accomplish"

My head is spinning as I gather up my things. As the morning winds down and she prepares to go lead a district workshop and then attend an evening board meeting, she asks me for feedback on how she can improve. She gives me a hug, wishes me luck on my writing, hands me a brownie, and thanks me for my time.